

FOCUS ON THE KING

Mark 8:22-9:13

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Whenever I go somewhere new, I never forget to take my preconceptions. Last month I visited friends in England. As an avid consumer of British literature, music, and television, I consider myself an expert on English culture. Having grown up with the Beatles, 007, and Monty Python, I felt well-prepared for a week in England.

Of course, the English have their preconceptions about us Yanks as well. Brits who grew up watching the A-Team, Charlie's Angels, and other exports of 1980s America are well-prepared to understand me.

The truth is that we rarely see anything in a fresh, pristine, blank slate kind of way. We see most everyone and everything through lenses shaped by our own histories, experiences, preconceptions. These lenses color or blur our vision such that we don't see with clarity. I'm thankful for cross-cultural experiences because it's in meeting people from another culture that we become most aware of these lenses.

Getting to know Jesus is very much the same. We come to him blinded by our preconceptions about him. We don't see him clearly, for who he is, because of false expectations and colored lenses. Mark 8:22-9:13 is all about how to lose those lenses and see him clearly.

ASK JESUS TO OPEN YOUR EYES (Mark 8:22-26)

How clearly do you see Jesus? I'm reminded of another gem in the crown of American media exports, Talladega Nights. Ricky Bobby (Will Farrell) is praying at the dinner table:

Ricky Bobby: Dear tiny, infant Jesus...

Mrs. Carley Bobby: Hey, you know, sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him "baby." It's a bit odd and off-putting to pray to a baby.

Ricky Bobby: Well, I like the Christmas Jesus best and I'm saying grace. When you say grace, you can say it to grownup Jesus, or teenage Jesus, or bearded Jesus or whoever you want.

It's a caricature, but you have to admit it's not that far off from the way our own lenses shape our view of Jesus.

Which Jesus do you like best? Maybe the ancient sage/Confucius Jesus? Or the peacemaker/Gandhi Jesus? Or the benevolent outlaw/Robin Hood Jesus? There are so many possibilities. And it's safe to assume that we all approach Jesus according to our own preferences. So the place to begin with Jesus is to ask *him* to open our eyes.

Apart from his help, we aren't going to see him clearly. Mark 1-8 reveals that the Pharisees were completely blind to Jesus. He performed miracle after miracle, yet the Pharisees asked for more signs. Jesus' preaching and teaching spoke to the very deepest issues of everyone's hearts, and yet the Pharisees kept accusing him of lies and asking him to tell them the real truth. The Pharisees thought that they were the most faithful and true believers in Israel at the time, yet when God visited them they could not see him, and they were too proud to ask him to open their eyes.

But it wasn't just the Pharisees. Jesus' disciples couldn't see him clearly either. When they met Jesus, they knew what the Messiah was supposed to look like and what he was supposed to do. They knew that he would come in shining armor, with a gleaming sword, at the helm of a huge and powerful army, to overthrow the Romans and reestablish Solomon's Empire. But Jesus didn't fit that mold. Even after he performed two amazing miracles, providing bread to feed 5,000 Jews, and then 4,000 Gentiles, the disciples (in Mark 8:16) were still clueless about how they would find enough to eat as they sailed across the Sea of Galilee to Bethsaida.

In Mark 8:22-26, Jesus healed a blind man, which was wonderful and amazing, and also unique among Jesus' miracles, because it happened in two stages:

Jesus asked him, "Do you see anything?" And he looked up and said, "I see people, but they look like trees, walking (Ents)." (Mark 8:23b-24 ESV)

So Jesus laid his hands on the man again, and this time the man was completely healed.

He opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. (Mark 8:25 ESV)

Why do you think it happened this way? Was it because Jesus had finally met his match in this particularly difficult malady? Was it because the man was carrying kryptonite, and Jesus' strength was waning? Keep in mind that thus far in Mark's Gospel Jesus had healed everyone else instantaneously, including raising a little girl from the dead. He also cast out legions of demons, and miraculously fed thousands of people. So it's really hard to believe that Jesus' batteries were running low.

Here's how I read it: Jesus wanted to teach his disciples about focusing on him, and he did it by way of an object lesson. There's an old saying that goes, "Everything you do teaches." Good leaders know this instinctually. They take their proteges with them wherever they go, to teach them whatever they do. Jesus gave a few sermons, but most of his teaching happened this way, through modeling and example. And so, knowing that "everything you do teaches," here was one of Jesus' most important object lessons for his disciples: a two-stage healing. As they prepared to depart for Caesarea Philippi, Jesus wanted them to be thinking about how this man went *from blind, to blurry, to brilliant*.

Soon enough, they would see Jesus transfigured on the mountain, revealed in all his brilliance. But on the way there, Jesus would spell out his mission to die and rise again, and the disciples wouldn't understand. So this two-stage healing is a model of what Peter in particular will experience in the next two scenes in Mark's Gospel, going from blind to blurry to brilliant.

So here's the first and most important point: *ask Jesus to open your eyes*. If the Pharisees and Jesus' own disciples could be completely blind to Jesus' true identity, then we most certainly can be as well. So *ask Jesus to open your eyes*. That's what this man and his friends asked of Jesus, and Jesus took him from blind to blurry to brilliant. We're just like this man, some of us blind, others with blurry vision. We want to see Jesus clearly, so we must begin by asking him to open our eyes.

CULTIVATE A MOUNTAINTOP VISION OF JESUS (Mark 9:2-8)

Let's skip to the transfiguration in Mark 9:2-8, in which Peter, James and John beheld Jesus in all his brilliance, as he later would appear after having risen from the dead on Easter. This was the moment that they had been waiting for, a glimpse of Jesus as they had always hoped to see him, awesome and terrifying and worthy of their allegiance. Jesus was giving them a mountaintop vision so that they might keep following him when they returned to the valley down below.

One of my best friends works for a commercial development company. They design and build enormous developments consisting of both commercial and residential space. Before his firm ever breaks ground, they have to seek and be granted permits from the city council. The key to convincing the city council is a set of quality plans and 3D models showing what all the buildings will look like. That's what will motivate the local authorities to approve a massive demolition and repurposing of an existing area of the city.

That's what Jesus was doing in the transfiguration. He gave us a mountaintop vision, a plan for the kingdom come under his authority as the risen and triumphant King. Why now? To motivate kingdom development down in the valley below.

The mountaintop wasn't just for disciples. It was also an important commissioning moment for Jesus. Did you notice who joined him up there? It was Moses and Elijah, who were important for all kinds of reasons, but most notably, they both were drawn to the Lord for the sake of the world atop Mt. Sinai. Both of them heard God speak to them there. Both of them saw God's glory there. And both of them were commissioned and sent out from there. So also, Jesus was commissioned atop a mountain for the sake of the world.

The mountaintop is also important because it's where the story of the Bible both begins and ends. In Genesis, mankind was first commissioned to multiply and steward creation in the mountaintop garden of God. In Revelation, when God makes all things new, he comes to reign as king forever with his people in the new Jerusalem, situated on a tall mountain, with the river of life flowing down from it.

The mountaintop new Jerusalem is where we want to be. It's what we were made for. When every tear will be wiped away, every wrong righted, and the knowledge of the glory of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters cover the seas. So how are we going to get there?

By way of another mountaintop. After the terrible sorrow of Good Friday, after the fantastic joy of Easter, Jesus met one last time with his disciples on a mountaintop somewhere in Galilee. And there he commissioned them, just as God commissioned Moses and Elijah atop Mt. Sinai centuries before. But because of the cross, everything was different. Believers no longer needed animal sacrifices in order to draw near to God. The blood of Christ covered their sins, the curtain of the temple has been torn in two, and by faith in Jesus they could take the mountaintop with them wherever they went. That wonderful experience of intimacy with God that Moses and Elijah and Peter all had atop the mountain was something every disciple could have, anytime, anywhere, because of the cross of Christ. So Jesus sent them out, and promised to be with them wherever they went. He sent them out to change the world, and he promised that he would be with them, until that day when the work is done, the kingdom is come, and all things are made new.

Do you know why Christians gather for worship on Sundays? It's because it's the day Jesus rose from the dead. Every Sunday is an Easter celebration. Which means that every Sunday ought to be a mountaintop experience for us. We gather to see Jesus clearly, so that we can then go back out into the world as ambassadors of the kingdom. That's my second point: we need to cultivate a mountaintop vision of Jesus in order to serve him faithfully in the valley below. The more clearly we see him as risen Lord, the Victor over sin and death and the devil, and righteous Judge over all the earth, the more clearly we will proclaim him in word and deed in our daily lives. Cultivate this vision together in worship on Sundays, and then individually through faithfully drawing near to him through prayer and his word, morning and evening every day.

FOCUS ON JESUS BY FOLLOWING HIM (Mark 8:27-9:1)

Just as the blind man in Bethsaida first saw people that looked like trees walking, our first perception of Jesus can be blurry as well. This was Peter's problem on the road to Caesarea Philippi, where Jesus asked the disciples a question "on the way."

Mark uses the expression "on the way" and its companion "the way of the Lord" as a kind of code language referring back to the Old Testament, in which God's people were called to join him in mission. When we read through Exodus together, we saw that the Old Testament didn't talk about "salvation" in the way that people often do today, as if God's main objective was to deliver us from death and destruction. Rather, God's objective in salvation is much bigger: that the earth would be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. So, the Gospel according to the OT is that *God delivered us from death and destruction, to himself, for the sake of the world.*

If we had kept reading when we finished Exodus, we would have seen that when the Israelites made it to the Promised Land, they lost sight of God's vision for the world. They became selfish,

turned to idols, and eventually found themselves exiled from the land. So in Isaiah, Mark's favorite book, the "way of the Lord" described how the Messiah would lead God's people in mission once again. Isaiah foretold a day when the Messiah would deliver God's people from exile, to himself, for the sake of the world. They would get back on track with God's original vision that the earth would be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

God still hasn't changed his plan. He still intends to save us *from, to* and *for*: He saves us *from* sin, *to* himself, *for* the sake of the world. He saves us and then sends us out in mission. So in Mark 8:27, where Jesus was "on the way" with his disciples, he was leading them in a salvation from, to and for: salvation from sin, to himself, for the sake of the world. And along the way, Jesus asked them what people are saying about him. What are the lenses through which he was being viewed by the crowds?

In v 28, they gave him the stock answers, what people usually said—John the Baptist, Elijah, other prophets. Note that Messiah was not one of their answers. People were seeing him only through their preconceptions. Maybe he was a prophet Jesus, or a teenage Jesus, or a tiny infant Jesus. All different lenses for seeing him.

But then in v 29 Jesus asked his disciples specifically to take a look at him and tell him what they saw. And Peter nailed it, saying: "*You are the Christ.*" It was a real breakthrough! No more blurry vision. Peter saw him clearly!

Except that he didn't. In v. 30, our English translations say something like "he strictly charged them to tell no one about him." In Greek, the word Mark used is typically translated "rebuked." It's the same word that is used in vv 32-33, and in both cases it is usually translated "rebuked." But here in v. 30, our English translations don't want to confuse us by saying Jesus rebuked him, if in fact Peter got it right. So what's going on? If Jesus was the Messiah, then why would he rebuke Peter for saying so? And why would he keep telling everyone in other stories to keep silent about him?

Because they had blurry vision regarding the meaning of "messiah." They were expecting a military conqueror rather than a suffering servant. And Jesus knew that even Peter still didn't get it, as evidenced by what happened next.

[Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. (Mark 8:31-32)

After teaching in parables, and answering questions with questions, Jesus finally spelled it out clearly for his disciples. "This is what Messiah means: If you're going to succeed 'on the way,' then you don't need a military conqueror. Rather, you need a Messiah who will deliver you from sin, to God, for the sake of the world."

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. (Mark 8:32)

The second rebuke. This is the heart of idolatry, when we take God aside and tell him what he can and cannot be according to our sovereign plans. "No God, you will not do it your way; we'll do it my way. I'm your friend, God. Trust me, my plan is better than yours." Peter didn't like the way that Jesus was leading, so he told Jesus to fall in line behind him.

How do you think Jesus liked that? Look at how Jesus responded:

But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." (Mark 8:33 ESV)

The third and final rebuke. "No sir, you will not lead me. Remember how this whole problem began, way back in the Garden, when a serpent took authority over the people, and the people took authority over God? You've stumbled into Satan's trap once again and you're doing the same thing."

No, if we're going to bring Jesus into focus, then it's going to happen not by leading but by following. As long as we suppose that we're in command of God, we're going to see whatever we want to see. If we make God into our own image, he ceases to be of any value to us. But as soon as we fall in line behind the Lord and genuinely give him our allegiance, that's when we begin to see clearly. There's no better way to focus on Jesus than by following him.

So Jesus gives his disciples very clear instructions on how to follow him, and it's not at all what you would expect of the Creator of the Universe. Instead of pomp and circumstance, there's suffering and service. Instead of profit, there's loss. Instead of self-aggrandizement, there's denial. But in the end, it is the way to eternal happiness. The way up is down. The door to eternal life is through sacrificial death.

And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. (Mark 8:34-35 ESV)

There's no better place to be than "on the way" with Jesus. Because of Easter, we've seen Jesus clearly. We have a mountaintop vision of the kingdom come, with the risen Lord Jesus ruling over all creation forever. Now he sends us out into the world as his ambassadors. How are we going to keep a clear vision of Jesus "on the way"? By following him. As long as we keep our eyes focused on him, we have nothing to worry about.

Believe me, it's a lot harder than it looks. And that's because Jesus keeps leading us in ways that don't make sense. If I could just get out in front and lead for awhile, I'm confident that I could make a huge dent in the problems facing our city and our world. Granted, a lot of little people would be crushed along the way, but that's the cost of progress under my administration.

But when Jesus is in front, he leads a different direction. What Jesus is explaining in this passage is that *the way of the Lord is the way of the cross*. God's mission to the world, making all things new, and

filling the earth with his glory, always centers in the cross. It is the foundation and cornerstone for how God is making all things new.

Apart from Christ, we would work ourselves to death trying to save the world, and the best we could ever do would be cosmetic surgery, covering over blemishes rather than healing the central problem of sin. But through the cross, people can be reconciled to God, and that will make all the difference for the institutions of the world. By leading people to the cross of Christ, we end up with many more compatriots in global transformation than if we had just tried to go it on our own. With the cross of Christ at the center, a little church like ours can change the world.

Do you want to see Jesus clearly? Then the way to bring him into focus is not by giving him orders, but instead by 1) asking him to open your eyes, 2) cultivating a mountaintop vision of him, and 3) falling into line behind him, and following him in his mission to the world.